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AUTHOR O'Brien, Leigh M.
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ABSTRACT

In the course of an ethnographic case study of a rural, Appalachian Head Start program, the researcher became increasingly aware of the bias she brought to the project in favor of the universal applicability of developmentally appropriate practice. The study was an extension of Sally Lubeck's "Sandbox Society" (1985), and focused on European-American teachers and their socioeconomic status. The study found that although the Head Start teachers exclusively professed to prefer an individualistic, child-centered model, in fact half the day's activities were the formal, teacher-directed group activities generally not considered developmentally appropriate for preschoolers. During the study, the researcher became aware that what the teachers were doing, based on their own life experiences, may in fact have been appropriate for children in that setting. The researcher concluded that a hybrid approach might be an alternative to choosing one type of program or the other. She also noted that early childhood educators must assess their assumptions and realize that a developmentally appropriate classroom may not always be appropriate for all children. (Contains 22 references.) (TM)

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TURNING MY WORLD UPSIDE DOWN

OR

HOW I LEARNED TO QUESTION DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICE

Leigh M. O'Brien

Nazareth College of Rochester

Rochester, NY 14610

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Turning My World Upside Down

Or How I Learned to Question Developmentally Appropriate Practice

When I began to write up my ethnographic case study of a rural, Appalachian Head Start program for my dissertation, I was quite certain that I, a well-informed and well-intentioned educator, was aware of my biases and would be able to consider them objectively. After all, I had taken courses in educational ethnography, I was conversant in critical theory, and I had included a detailed statement of background, biases, and knowledge in my dissertation which touched upon, among other things, my belief in NAEYC defined and described (1987) developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). I believed I was sensitive to the lives and work situations of the three teachers, European-American women from the surrounding community, who were the focus of the study. As we shall see, such was not the case.

The study I did was an extension of Sally Lubeck's 1985 work, Sandbox Society: Education in Black and White America, which contrasted teacher values, explicated through their practice, in a middle-class preschool with white children and teachers, and a Head Start program with Black children and teachers. By analyzing four constructs (time, space, materials and activities, and teacher-child interactions), Lubeck found a decided preference for an individualistic orientation among the White teachers, while the Black teachers preferred a more group-oriented approach. Lubeck linked teacher preferences for different kinds of practice to the teachers' respective races and hence life experiences (as others have, e.g., Grant & Sleeter, 1986; Heath, 1983), but she did not independently consider social class, a major confound. My study used the same constructs but all the teachers were European-American and their socioeconomic status (SES) became the primary focus.

As I wrote up my findings, it became clear to me that although the teachers in the Head Start program professed to prefer a very individualistic, child-centered model, the brief day that the children experienced was split almost exactly between the informal, child-initiated activities which are considered developmentally appropriate for preschool-age children and more formal, teacher-directed group activities with a strong academic emphasis. In short, the program could not be considered a true adherent to DAP regardless of teacher verbalizations.

This split focus I knew was not atypical; most Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs cannot be considered to be completely in one "camp" or another. What I did find unusual, although in retrospect the situation was similar to that of the Black teachers in Lubeck's study, was that the teachers in my study exclusively supported a so-called developmental approach when asked to choose between preferred model classrooms (using Winetsky's Educational Activities Index, 1978) and during interviews also orally indicated their preference for such an approach.

Although, as was noted in a previous paper (O'Brien, 1990), all three teachers used the mandated High/Scope curriculum in a rather directive way, only one of the three, "Sandy", an assistant teacher, vocalized her concerns about the curriculum model they were supposed to use. Sandy's practice was usually far more directive than the head teacher's; she told me she thought that the program ought to be better preparing the children, in terms of skills, knowledge, and behaviors, for the very structured, academic public schools they would soon be entering.

When I asked what she thought the children should get from their time in the Head Start program she said,

> "...that they're sociable, they can sit in a classroom. They're prepared for kindergarten: I think that's important too. In fact, I think that's sometimes more important than what Head Start's philosophy is. Because I don't feel sometimes that we prepare the kids enough for kindergarten...[they need structure] so that they'll succeed in school." She added, comparing her son to the children in Head Start, "...he went to a private nursery school--as opposed to somebody that comes to Head Start, 'Jimmy' had more of an advantage. It was a more structured atmosphere. Sometimes this structure is needed. It was a much more stricter environment of a nursery school than what we have here and, in turn, he's an A student. That's the difference."

Her words registered with me, but rather than acknowledge her expertise on her culture and community, I came up with explanations for her preference in programming such as personality, and social class variation between her and the head teacher. I finally began to at least consider that perhaps I had overlooked the value of the teachers' life experiences when during my dissertation defense, one committee member repeatedly suggested that I was critiquing the Head Start teachers' practices. I was resistant to such a notion, avowing my understanding of their situations and pointing out that I was only making clear the difference between their stated preferences and their practices.

Another committee member suggested, but unfortunately did not pursue, that maybe what the teachers were doing was appropriate practice for the children in that setting. We all noted the difficulty the teachers faced in both trying to adhere to the "developmental" curriculum they were told to use (High/Scope)

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and their felt need to compensate for poor home environments as well as ready children for public school, in two four-hour classroom days. But again, we did not follow up on this issue or question the implications of the situation.

It should be noted here that the Head Start teachers had no prior knowledge of DAP until I brought in a copy of NAEYC'S position statement and no specific references to DAP were ever made. It must also be noted that although I was aware of the power I had as an individual from a more privileged environment, as a researcher from the local university, and as a former instructor of one of the teachers, at no time during the study did I question the larger issue of power differentials. That is, I failed to question the mainstream (European-American, middle- and upper-middle class) ECE assumption that DAP was The Way, the one True Approach to teaching young children or whether the ECE "establishment" should dictate the use of this approach regardless of context.

As I began presenting my findings others' comments forced me to reconsider the universal applicability of DAP. My focus had been on the social class of the teachers and what that meant for programming in terms of the four constructs noted earlier. I now started to question whether we could assume that all young children should attend the same kinds of programs given great variation in life experiences and, hence, future opportunities. I remembered what Lisa Delpit (1986) had written with regard to unequal power relations in schools and began to hypothesize that perhaps her contentions about Black children and literacy (i.e., that both process and product ought to be focused on) applied to lower SES children and ECE as well.

Delpit's ideas about what was, in effect, the exclusion of children outside the mainstream from school success by assuming they needed the same

approach as European-American, middle-class children gave support to my emerging hypothesis. But it wasn't until I read several articles critiquing DAP (Bloch, 1991; Jipson, 1991; Walsh, 1991) that I felt truly on the right track. These articles encouraged me to reread other relevant articles and to continue to refine my position on social class and power differentials in ECE.

For example, when I reread Polly Greenberg's 1990 article, "Why not academic preschool?", I was struck by her assumption that children would be from "moderately literate families" and have "middle-class parents"; children's exposure to sounds and letters would occur in a playful, natural manner. She adds that the child will be exposed to academics and will learn concepts "each in his own way and each in his own time" (p. 78). I began to wonder about children who don't have the home lives and experiences she assumed they would.

Gersten, Darch, and Gleason (1988) assert that because the link between poverty and school failure is still strong, there remains a need for intensive early education. They argue, as Delpit has, that skills may need to be taught to children who are outside of the mainstream. To support their belief that low-income children may need qualitatively different early education, Gersten et al. quote Eugene Campbell, Superintendent of Newark Schools:

> Middle-class parents are able to enhance their children's development because of their OWN educational background and their economic ability to provide... such amenities as cultural outings, educational toys, and travel experiences. Their children thus have a competitive edge. They are "readier" for school because they have been "pushed" at home.

Those of us who cling to the hope that education can promote equity

> support public preschool policies that give similar advantages to children who do not have alternative resources.
>
> If such a policy means that administrators and teachers...must do the "pushing", then so they should. If it means that the content of today's prekindergarten or kindergarten curriculum must be more rigorous... then so it should.

I've also begun to look at readings in Early Childhood Special Education, thinking there may be some connections between practice for children with various "special needs", including those with academic knowledge needs, needs for certain culturally-valued skills, and access-to-power-in-the-mainstream needs. I've been wondering if it may, in fact, be appropriate for compensatory programs targeted at the poor (such as Head Start) to attempt to produce outcomes that would not occur in the absence of intervention or teaching, as programs targeted to children with special needs do.

Carta, Schwartz, Atwater, and McConnell, (1991) contend that "the DAP guidelines, in offering a single approach to teaching, place undue restrictions on the options for teaching young children with disabilities" (p. 6). The restrictions they refer to may also apply to teaching young children who are outside the mainstream of U.S. society. For example, Miller (1989) cites the resentment of some African-Americans toward government policy makers trying to impose middle-class, child-centered methods on low-income child care centers. These methods were seen as being unrelated to the African-American children's "special needs" and were viewed as an import from the European-American community.

Conclusion

When I first started to seriously question my unstated assumptions about

DAP and its universal applicability, I was very uncomfortable with the notion that I was a part of a mainstream power base which decided what was best for all practitioners in the field of ECE. It may well be that, as Delpit claims, those with power are least aware of it, and least willing to acknowledge its existence. As she suggests we do, I had to target myself for study, and "...be vulnerable enough to allow my world to turn upside down" (1988, p. 297).

Having turned my world upside down, I have come to two related conclusions. The first conclusion, a rather tentative one, is that there may be no need to divide into two camps, the "developmental" versus the "academic". Instead, perhaps we can fuse the two approaches, creating a hybrid (see Lubeck, 1989) while taking individual situations into consideration. We could find that middle ground advocated by Schickedanz, Chay, Gopin, Sheng, Song, & Wild, where we both "preserve childhood" and give children access to academic skills (1990).

We don't have to adopt the behavioristic DISTAR model, but, because most of our schools are geared to the mainstream culture, some children do need content they don't get at home if they are to have a chance for academic success. Further, children need to focus on product as well as process because products are valued, and are based on specific cultural codes children need to know. Poor children, like others outside the mainstream, need the "cultural capital" which allows access to power.

We can start early education "where the children are", taking cultural and community context into consideration, and move toward a model of practice more in line with dominant ECE approaches. That way, both the cultures with which children come to educational settings as well as the cultures with which they need to be familiar in order to be successful can be addressed. Derman-Sparks

(1989) calls this "bicultural, bi-cognitive" education and notes that this approach allows the child to function well in both the "mother" culture and the dominant culture. Shirley Brice Heath's work in three southern communities, (1983), and the more recent Project FIEL, focused on Mexican and Mexican-American families (Quintero & Huerta-Macias, 1991), provide examples of early education where cultural variation was considered and community involvement valued. Maybe the teachers in the Head Start program where I did my study had the right idea after all!

This last point brings me to my second conclusion which deals more directly with issues of power. I had "heard" Sally Lubeck when she talked about the Black women in the Head Start program she studied following the curriculum mandated by their administrator when they had to, but doing their own program based on culturally-perceived needs when the administrator was not around. I had "heard" Shirley Brice Heath tell of the difficulty White, lower-class children had adjusting to mainstream schooling because of their "culturally different" home learning. I had "heard" Lisa Delit speak about the process-product dilemma and issues of access to power with which Black educators struggle. And I had "heard" Sandy, one of the Head Start teachers in my own study, question their programming in light of her experience with the children and schools in her community. I had "heard" all of these voices, but still I was not able to listen.

I did not want to acknowledge my own power. I could not give the diverse voices speaking my complete attention. I was not able to apply social reproduction theory to the gentle, well-meaning world of ECE. I could not see that although the DAP focus on independent, autonomous functioning might make sense for those already in power who already know the (mainstream) codes,

those without power may want and need a different kind of practice. I was not able to give validity to a value orientation which conflicted with my (mainstream) values.

I now believe that in both our practice and our research, early childhood educators must reassess issues of inclusion and exclusion, power and lack thereof, voices and silenced voices, whose experiences are valued and whose are not, and diversity of practice in the field. We must acknowledge that "...it is impossible to create a model for the good teacher without taking issues of culture and community context into account" (Delpit, 1988, p. 291). We have to really listen to the voices of non-White, non-middle-class educators and stop trying to tell people that we know what's best for them. We have to not just say, but truly believe, that people are experts on their own lives.

We also have to continue to raise questions about DAP. For example, whose knowledge and ways of knowing are represented by DAP? Whose interests are served by a curriculum based on such practice? And whose experiences are represented (O'Loughlin, 1991)? Is what's considered appropriate in one culture possibly inappropriate in another? That is, is it possible that our "developmentally appropriate" classrooms really aren't appropriate for some children?

I have been sobered by the realization that I gave the Head Start teachers who allowed me access to their lives and thoughts less credit than their due because of my strong bias toward DAP and mainstream ECE. I hope the description of my experience of turning my world upside down and learning to question DAP may lead others to reexamine the "taken for granted" in ECE today.

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